

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 800

FL 027 882

AUTHOR Siskin, H. Jay
TITLE The Native Speaker: Membership Has Its Privileges.
PUB DATE 2003-00-00
NOTE 5p.; In: The Sociolinguistics of Foreign-Language Classrooms: Contributions of the Native, the Near-Native, and the Non-Native Speaker. Issues in Language Program Direction, A Series of Annual Volumes; see FL 027 869.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Differences; Cultural Education; Elementary Secondary Education; French; Higher Education; *Language Usage; *Native Speakers; Second Language Learning; Sociolinguistics
IDENTIFIERS *Privilege

ABSTRACT

This paper responds to Claire Kramsch's essay on the demise of the notion of the idealized native speaker as the model for second language learning and implications for second languages and cultures education. In her essay, Kramsch forcefully argues against the native speaker construct and exhorts teachers and learners not to abandon their unique multilingual perspective on the foreign language and on its literature and culture to emulate the idealized monolingual native speaker. This paper argues that the very belief in the existence of a native speaker motivates many language learners, whose goal is personal transformation by the adoption of behaviors and cultural values imputed to native speakers. The native speakers, or transformed nonnative speakers, serve as immediate instantiations of the transformative power of a new language and culture. The paper focuses on the study of French by nonnative speakers. It suggests that although the transformative power of language is not necessarily the primary motivation for language learners, it is a powerful factor, and in order for students to achieve their goal, they must believe implicitly in the native speaker construct. The paper concludes that "to deny our students the privilege of this belief, particularly at the beginning of their course of study, is not in our self interest." (SM)

The Native Speaker: Membership Has Its Privileges

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS
BEEN GRANTED BY

Sean Kelchem



H. Jay Siskin
Cabrillo College

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to
improve reproduction quality.

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

• Points of view or opinions stated in this
document do not necessarily represent
official OERI position or policy.

ED 481 800

In her essay, Kramersch forcefully argues against the native speaker construct, calling it “imaginary” ... “[an] ideal that corresponds less and less to reality (p. 363).” In the form of a rhetorical question, she exhorts teachers and learners not to abandon “their unique multilingual perspective on the foreign language and on its literature and culture to emulate the idealized monolingual native speaker (p. 360)”. Although her observations are convincing, I will argue that the very belief in the existence of a native speaker motivates many language learners, whose goal is personal transformation by the adoption of behaviors and cultural values imputed to native speakers. The “native speaker”—or the transformed non-native speaker—serve as immediate instantiations of the transformative power of a new language and culture.

Kramersch is dismissive of this motivation, claiming that “more often than not, insiders do not want outsiders to become one of them (as learners of Japanese have often experienced), and even if given the choice, most language learners would not want to become one of them” (p. 364). She continues by asserting that “[t]he pleasure of annexing a foreign language does not primarily consist in identifying with flesh-and-blood native-speaking nationals” (p. 364). I am not certain how Kramersch has arrived at these conclusions. Nevertheless, even if sheer numbers back up her claims, an examination of the autobiographical narratives of French language learners confirms that identification with flesh-and-blood culture bearers is a powerful motivation that cannot be ignored.

That language study transforms a student is both a desired outcome and standard rationale for its inclusion in the curriculum. The formulæ are familiar: language study opens the world, expands horizons, develops critical thinking skills, and builds vocabulary and knowledge of grammar in the native language. Less often mentioned

to the general public, but strikingly present in the autobiographical genre, is the social transformation experienced by students of French. Mastery of French represents a means of improving one's social standing, going beyond one's humble or provincial origins, "passing." Here are some examples.

Alice Kaplan's anxiety over the pronunciation of the French "r" during her initial study in Switzerland betrays her desire to overcome her Midwestern upbringing. Her American "r" is a source of dissatisfaction, an obstacle to her passing for French: "In September my 'r' is clunky, the one I've brought with me from Minnesota. It is like cement overshoes, like wearing wooden clogs in a cathedral. It is like any number of large objects in the world—all of them heavy, all of them out of place, all of them obstacles. *Je le heurte*—I come up against it like a wall" (p. 54).

In describing her American "r", Kaplan uses images that may be applied to the peasant, the worker, the socially inferior, the outsider. Mastering the French "r", on the other hand, identifies her as an insider and, by inference, advances her socially: "So that feeling of coming onto the 'r' like a wall was part of feeling the essence of my American speech patterns in French, feeling them as foreign and awkward. I didn't know at the time how important it was to feel that American 'r' like a big lump in my throat and to be dissatisfied about it. Feeling the lump was the first step, the prerequisite to getting rid of it" (p. 54). Kaplan has discarded her wooden clogs, her peasant status, and presumably feels at ease in the lofty cathedral.

Fowlie describes his acquisition of French as a process that allows him to relive his life in a fresh and better fashion: "When we began using the first phrases in French, such as opening a door and saying that we were doing so, it was not only a new experience in language for me, but I actually seemed to be opening the door in a new way. I seized upon the opportunity of making French into a ritual by means of which I might correct all my past blunders and come fresh upon the universe to manipulate it anew. French was to be, justifiably, my studied and rehearsed approach to life, the very kind I had been searching for unwittingly" (p. 14).

French permits Nelson to transform herself into an upper-class woman, with the distant, authoritarian and even contemptuous attitude that such social status may confer: "I was a French ambassador in and out of my classroom. I was Madame. In everything I said and did I created a French aura about me. In all my note writing to students, parents, administration, and colleagues, my signature was Madame. A certain aura is a must for any teacher" (p. 8).

On another difficult occasion, Nelson met the gaze of her adversary “with a stare more frigid and haughty than his, then I extended my hand in the typical gesture of a French upper-class woman. This was more eloquent than words” (p. 8). Nelson self-identifies as French, a transformation that allows her to assume a superior and unassailable posture.

Gegerias characterizes her method of teaching as a “Cartesian elixir from the ancient art of alchemy” (p. 66) that “transmute[s] basic metals into gold” (p. 70). It is “the matrix for transforming hesitant American students of French into more confident francophiles (p. 65); and the source of an “intellectual transformation” (p. 68).

Before studying French, students were equated with base metals, which, through an alchemist’s (=teacher’s) intervention, could be turned into the social signifier of wealth, status and power: gold. French could transform the mundane into the glamorous, the hesitant into the confident.

While a Cartesian elixir may serve as the instrumentality of transformation and consequent social elevation signified by the French language, in some cases, the sexual act—with a native or perceived native speaker of French—assumed this role. Kaplan describes her affair with André. Years later, after rereading a love letter in which he corrected her French usage, she remarks, “This should have been my first clue that what I really wanted from André was language, but in the short run all it did was make me feel more attached to him, without knowing why I was attached. [...] What I wanted more than anything, more than André even, was to make those sounds, which were the true sounds of being French ...” (p. 86). Reflecting on André’s rejection of her, Kaplan confesses, “I wanted to breathe in French with André, I wanted to sweat French sweat. It was the rhythm and pulse of his French I wanted, the body of it, and he refused me, he told me I could never get that” (p. 94). Rather than being an ameliorative experience, Kaplan’s liaison resulted in physical deformation, the herpes simplex she caught from André, which caused her face and ear to swell.

Oxenhandler, in his quest for transcendence through French, altered his sexual identity: “I had my first homosexual experience with Michel at the University of Chicago in 1948. Meeting this brilliant teacher was the most exciting thing that happened in my years on a campus where politics, the arts, and the intellectual life were in ferment. I went to hear Michel read Rimbaud and came away hooked on French literature. Later, I took his courses. Under his look of a Scotch clergyman there was a subversive and seductive Socrates who understood the dreams of young men who left home to discover the world

of literature and the arts. Above all he held the key to France, to that wonderful culture I had briefly tasted as a GI; his knowledge of it seemed inexhaustible, and, to my amazement, he wanted to share it with me. There was a slight inconvenience in the fact that I did not measure up to his passion; but I was willing to make myself over, to become a gay man, if it meant that the treasures of French culture would be mine" (pp. 85–86).

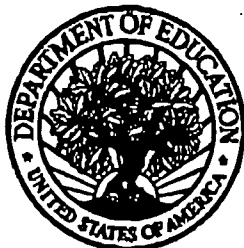
Finally, Miller describes her summers at Middlebury, where she discovered the "fatal connection between French and sex (or at least French professors and American girls)" (p. 54). When complimented on the quality of her spoken French, she experiences a moment of *jouissance* : does she mean mere enjoyment or sexual pleasure? Undoubtedly, both.

It is not my claim that the transformative power of language is the primary motivation for language learners. However, as these excerpts illustrate, it is a powerful and seductive factor. In order to achieve their goal, these students—among them successful French scholars—believed implicitly in the native speaker construct. To deny our students the "privilege" of this belief, particularly at the beginning of their course of study, is not in our self interest. To relegate them to "the interstices of national languages and [...] the margins of monolingual speakers' territories" (p. 368) is to arrogate a decision that ignores student motivation.

Works Cited

- Fowlie, Wallace.** 1977. *Journal of Rehearsals*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gegerias, Mary.** 1998. Learning to Think in French (Cartesian Elixir). In *Stories Teachers Tell: Reflecting on Professional Practice*, edited by Douglas K. Hartman, 63–70. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.
- Kaplan, Alice.** 1993. *French Lessons*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, Nancy K.** *Getting Personal*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991.
- Nelson, Mary D.** 1989. *Motivating With Love*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University.
- Oxenhandler, Neal.** 1996. *Looking for Heroes in Postwar France*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England.

fj027882



U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)



REPRODUCTION RELEASE

BLANKET

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: AAUSC ISSUES IN LANGUAGE PROGRAM DIRECTION	
Author(s): MAGNAN, SALLY SIELOFF	
Corporate Source: HEINLE / THOMSON LEARNING	Publication Date: 11/14/03

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

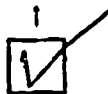
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1



Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A



Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B



Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign
here,→
please

Signature: <i>[Signature]</i>	Printed Name/Position/Title: Sean Ketchum, editor	
Organization/Address: Heinle, 25 Thomson Place,	Telephone: 617-281-7720	FAX: 617-289-7851
Boston, MA 02210	E-Mail Address: sean.ketchum@heinle.com	Date: 9/30/03

(over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:	Heinle / Thomson Learning
Address:	25 Thomson Place Boston, MA 02210
Price:	\$25.00

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:
Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
4483-A Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland 20706

Telephone: 301-552-4200

Toll Free: 800-799-3742

FAX: 301-552-4700

e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov

WWW: <http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com>